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Note on the Hexameter in James 1 17

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JAS. 1 17 contains, as every student of the Epistle knows, a defective hexameter verse. The defect consists in the fact that in the second foot instead of the regular dactyl or spondee we have a tribrach, and the manuscripts offer no variant readings to correct the irregularity. The hexameter is one form of dactylic rhythm, and hence the use of a tribrach anywhere in a hexameter verse is rhythmically illogical.

Sometimes in classical Greek poetry a short syllable having the ictus upon it occurs where a long syllable is expected, and it is commonly said that the short syllable is lengthened under the ictus. But in most cases of this sort some other cause can be discovered.¹ So in regard to Jas. 1 17 it is sometimes said that the short syllable *σις* in *δόςις* is lengthened under the ictus, so that the second foot is practically equivalent to a dactyl.² But, apart from the question as to the possibility of such lengthening under the ictus,³ it is difficult to believe that any poet, except some popular or non-literary maker of verses, would have allowed himself such metrical license when the difficulty could be avoided as easily as it can in the present case. Hence Blass, having this passage in mind, says that "the specimens of verse which have been found [in the New Testament] are for the most part of such a quality that they are better left unmentioned."⁴

¹ Seymour, *Introduction to the Language and Verse of Homer*, p. 87; Jebb, *Homer*, pp. 193 f.

² Mayor, *The Epistle of St. James*,² p. 54.

³ Seymour, *op. cit.*, p. 87, who characterizes the doctrine as "obsolete."

⁴ Blass, *Grammatik des Neutestamentlichen Griechisch*,² p. 304 (Eng. tr., p. 297).

From the point of view of classical and literary verse this judgment is certainly sound. But just as we are all familiar with modern specimens of verse-writing which could in no wise be called classical or literary in either form or sentiment, so also in antiquity there were composed many verses of a character no more meritorious. Many examples of such are preserved in inscriptions, and they are not infrequently as faulty in metre as they are barren in sentiment.⁵ But they are nevertheless interesting and instructive as representing the attempts of ordinary people to write verses. If an epitaph was needed, some friend or relative, or perhaps a local maker of grave-stones, would supply what was deemed an appropriate verse. Such productions may therefore be called the non-literary verses of plain people. Now with a few well-known exceptions the writers of the New Testament belonged to this class, and their language is akin to the speech of plain people engaged in the ordinary affairs of life. This has been amply demonstrated in our own day by the study of inscriptions, papyri, and inscribed potsherds. Allen has found in inscriptions several hexameter verses which show the same defect as that noted in the hexameter contained in Jas. 1 17.⁶ A short final syllable in the second foot having the ictus upon it occurs where a long syllable is expected. In three of these cases the second foot of the hexameter consists of a tribrach, as in Jas. 1 17.⁷ Hence it may be that the hexameter in James is another example of popular or non-literary verse-making.

It was said above that the difficulty in our verse could have been easily avoided, and we must believe that a skilful poet would have availed himself of the opportunity to do so. By inserting τ' , which might easily have fallen out of the text, after $\delta\delta\sigma\iota\varsigma$ the sense is not materially altered and the

⁵ For a careful and thorough study of the metrical structure of verses found in Greek inscriptions, see Allen in *Papers of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens*, iv. pp. 35 ff.

⁶ Allen, *op. cit.*, iv. p. 74.

⁷ There may be also a fourth instance, but Allen is uncertain as to the text.

metrical defect is removed.⁸ We then have a perfect hexameter verse: *πᾶσα δόσις τ' ἀγαθὴ καὶ πᾶν δώρημα τέλειον*.

If with several modern interpreters we regard the verse as a quotation from some Greek poem of the classical or Hellenistic period,⁹ this slight correction of the text seems to be necessary. But on the other hand we may believe the verse to be a specimen of such non-literary versification as is sometimes found in inscriptions, or we may agree with other scholars that the occurrence of the hexameter in James is purely accidental.¹⁰ If we adopt either of the last-mentioned views, the text may stand unchanged.

⁸ For the position of *τε* cf., e.g., Thuc. 4. 26, 4: οὗς *ῥοντο* ἡμερῶν *ὀλίγων* *ἐκπολιορκήσιν ἐν νήσῳ τε ἐρήμῃ καὶ ὕδατι ἁλμυρῷ χρωμένους*.

⁹ Ewald, *Das Sendschreiben an die Hebräer und Jakobus Rundschreiben*, p. 190; Mayor, *The Epistle of St. James*,² p. 54; Spitta, *Zur Geschichte und Litteratur des Urchristentums*, ii. p. 40, n. 2; von Soden,³ in *Handcommentar zum N. T.*, p. 181.

¹⁰ Huther,⁵ in Meyer's *Kommentar*, p. 72, n. 1 (Eng. tr., p. 71, n. 1); Beyschlag,⁶ in Meyer's *Kommentar*, p. 71, n. 1.